



Matthew 17:4–6

4 Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” 5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terri-

fied.

Reflection

In Matthew's gospel a lot of important things happen on mountains: Satan's final temptation of Jesus (4:8), the Sermon on the Mount (5:1–8:1), the feeding of those four thousand Gentiles (15:29), and Jesus' teaching on the Mount of Olives (21:1; 24). Even the Great Commission (28:16–20) took place on a mountain; but no mountain scene is more important than the transfiguration in Matthew 17:1–9.

In yesterday's passage Jesus took his inner circle – Peter, James and John – up on a mountain and he was transfigured before their eyes. He 'was transfigured' (17:2), which means Jesus didn't change

his own appearance, God the Father did. For a brief moment God pulled back the curtain of time, space and Jesus' humanity to reveal his son in all his glory before the very eyes of Peter, James and John. Jesus' face shone like the sun, his clothes became blindingly bright, and at his either side stood two of the greatest figures from the Old Testament. All of a sudden Moses was there. The one who was given the Law on Mount Sinai (Ex 19–31) and who had been promised by God that one day another prophet like himself would come to save God's people (Deut 18:18). Now the one greater than Moses is here. The other figure is Elijah, who similarly had had an encounter with God on Mount Horeb (1 Kgs 19), he was so great that he didn't die but was taken up directly to heaven (2 Kgs 2). Elijah was the forerunner of the

Messiah, the one he's now standing beside.

We can only imagine the thoughts and sensations that must have been running through Peter, James and Johns' minds as they tried to take in this scene. In our passage today, Peter again speaks on behalf of the others, in verse four, when he says,

“Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

This is classic Peter, acting before thinking, speaking before having properly thought things through. We have to admire his courage in stepping out and walking on water, in promising Jesus that the Romans would

never take him, and in swearing to Jesus that he would never disown him; but Peter lived to regret his rash behaviour. This too is classic Peter.

Peter didn't really know what to say, so he said something that really makes no sense at all. 'Lord, it's good that you brought us, because if you'd like us to, we can make some tents for you guys.' Here's Jesus shining like the sun, looking every bit like the one who is currently holding the whole universe into being by his powerful word, and there's Moses who must be a good 1400 years old if he's a day, and finally Elijah, who last time he was seen was riding a chariot of fire into the heavens. These men don't need tents! Jesus hasn't brought Peter, James and John along to build tents; this whole display, the trans-

figuration of Jesus, is for them. It's a crucial part of their final preparation before Jesus leaves them and goes to heaven.

But things have barely begun for Peter, James and John because while Peter's still talking about tents, the God of the universe himself cuts him off, see in verse 5,

5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

Well finally this was all too much for the disciples, who fell face down on the ground terrified, as the bright cloud descended and God's voice reverberated into their very beings. As devout Jews they couldn't

have helped but recall God descending on Mount Sinai in Exodus 19. On that day there was thick cloud, thunder and lightning, smoke and fire, and all Israel camped at the base of the mountain were trembling with fear, terrified. The author of Hebrews describes the scene as coming to a mountain...

‘... burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast and to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them ... The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear.’ Heb 12:19, 21

Later on, in 2 Peter, a letter Peter wrote knowing that shortly he was going to die,

Peter recalled this very moment here in Matthew 17. Peter's passionately defending the gospel with some of his very last words, with his dying words, and he says emphatically 'we were eyewitnesses'. And when you think of everything that Peter witnessed, of all that he saw – he'd seen Jesus walk on water, calm storms with a word, he saw Jesus raise people from the dead, he saw Jesus' resurrected body, he even saw Jesus ascend back into heaven – but of all he saw and everything he witnessed, today's passage is the one for Peter. Nothing tops this. Listen to him, in 2 Peter 1,

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eye-

witnesses of his majesty. 17 He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. 18 We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

‘This is the one. Nothing tops this. This is why you must believe the gospel. We were eyewitnesses of this. God spoke from heaven, and said that Jesus was his Son and that we must listen to him.’

We’ve often remarked at Jesus’ economy of words. How he can say so much, so powerfully, with so few words. Well it seems that Jesus gets this from his Father.

In saying, 'This is my Son' not only is God the Father revealing beyond all shadow of a doubt that Jesus is his son, but he's also quoting Psalm 2, naming him not just Son but also Messiah. And then, when he follows on with 'with him I am well pleased' he's quoting from Isaiah 42, not just naming Jesus as Son and Messiah but also identifying him as the Suffering Servant (Isa 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12; and 61:1–3). So in a handful of words God the Father brings together all the major strands of prophecy from the Old Testament about Jesus: Son, Saviour, Servant, standing there shining like the sun, alongside the two greatest prophets from the Old Testament.

The God of the universe finishes speaking with these words, surely nothing can

be more important than these words,

‘Listen to him!’

Think & Pray

Are you listening to Jesus? Jesus said that we're the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that we're to go and make disciples of all nations. Are you listening to Jesus? Jesus told us to love our neighbour as ourselves, and not to worry about anything, but to seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and he'll provide everything else we need. Are you listening to Jesus? Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life, no-one gets to the Father except through me.' Are you listening to Jesus, the Son of God? And Jesus has just said, 'Whoever wants to be my dis-

ciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me, lose their life so they can find it. Ask yourself this morning, are you listening to Jesus, God's son? Because the God of the universe could not be clearer in our passage today when he says,

“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

Pray today that you and I both would be obedient to God the Father as we listen to, and obey, his precious Son whom he sent into the world to die for us. By his blood shed on our behalf and through faith in his great name we pray. Amen.